Stuart Hodkinson, *Safe as Houses: Private Greed, Political Negligence and Housing Policy After Grenfell***,** Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019; 272 pp.: 978-1-5261-2998-7, £11.99 (pbk)

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Stuart Hodkinson's *Safe as Houses* provides a vital fine-grained account of processes of privatisation, outsourcing and deregulation in UK public housing since 1979. He convincingly argues that such processes led to the horrific death in 2017 of 72 people in the Grenfell Tower fire, and may yet lead to further human tragedy without adequate intervention. Grounded in the author's extensive research into housing private finance initiatives (PFI) in the UK since 2007, the book frames the Grenfell Tower housing disaster as an entry point for a deeper institutional inquiry into what he terms 'social murder' (following Engels' description of unnecessary deaths due to unregulated capitalism). Hodkinson reveals how housing privatisation in the UK has been accompanied by a dangerous deregulation of the legal standards governing building and housing safety, and the deterioration of effective third-party inspection and enforcement. In this way, the book adds to critiques of housing privatisation in the UK and elsewhere (Boughton, 2018; Stein, 2019) by providing a comprehensive account of the horrendous safety implications arising from the privatisation of public housing since the 1980s.

That Grenfell cannot be dismissed as an isolated incident is confirmed by the seven major fires and 11 deaths in high-rise public housing tower blocks since

1986, each of them linked to inflammable cladding, just as Grenfell was. In the introduction, Hodkinson makes it clear that the government and local authorities are culpable for ignoring expert advice recommending that all housing cladding be actively fire-resistant and that water sprinkler systems be integrated in all new and existing tower blocks. One key argument is that a "more flexible regulatory framework" has been accompanied by a steep rise in unaccountable "self-regulation" by the very companies building and maintaining housing in the UK (7). Following a carefully charted account of the decline of building regulation through both the Conservative and New Labour governments since 1985, Hodkinson observes that an estimated 85 per cent of all building work is now 'self-certified' via privatised regulation companies in a competitive bidding market, creating considerable market share benefits for private regulation companies to speedily approve building projects. Deteriorating regulation standards, along with the disempowerment of local authority environmental officers, have greatly facilitated unsafe building approvals.

At the heart of the problem, Hodkinson argues, is the ideological fallacy that fire safety and housing quality can be left securely to "the voluntary action of profit-seeking capitalists rather than remaining a state-enforced requirement" (11). Crucially, this argument is given resonance in the book's wider critique of the demunicipalisation of UK housing and its often-hidden repercussions in terms of safety, building standards and regulation; a phenomenon that is not only applicable to housing. In chapter 1, Hodkinson defends public housing as a historic medium of quality design, regulation and control in housing that has provided a necessary challenge to unsafe housing under unregulated capitalism. He charts

the rise of municipal housing from the late 1860s to the post-war peak of 1979, when public housing comprised 6.6 million homes, or a third of the UK's housing stock, contending that municipal housing, despite its flaws, was above all borne from a "bottom-up movement against social murder and for safer housing, safer workplaces and safer cities" (25-26). He then summarises the processes of neoliberal rollback, privatisation and outsourcing that have led to the current housing crisis. A crucial marker for Hodkinson here is the New Labour Decent Homes programme (2000), which linked (minimal) upgrading of housing standards to housing privatisation via either local authority stock transfer (option 1); transfer to arm's-length management organisations (ALMOs) (option 2); or private finance initiatives (PFI) schemes (option 3). The cumulative result of these policies has been a net loss of 4.5 million council homes since 1979, involving a decline of council housing from 32 per cent of all housing stock to 8 per cent by 2018. Hodkinson's account of this process involves a thorough analysis of PFI schemes in particular and an emphasis on the under-acknowledged deterioration of building regulation and safety standards that has accompanied privatisation, reinforced by near 50 per cent austerity budget cuts to local authorities and the Health and Safety Executive since 2010-11.

The war of attrition against public/social housing provision and building and safety standards is given full expression in chapters 2-4, where Hodkinson opens up the link between PFI and the UK's urban regeneration schemes, showing how fiscal constraints gave birth to PFI (which operates 'off-the-books' in terms of public debt and borrowing), allowing it to become a principal actor in the splintered and unaccountable governance that typifies UK social housing today.

The primer on PFI in chapter 2 shows the fallacy of PFI as 'value for money', revealing how it always costs more than public sector borrowing and typically reduces standards. Chapters 3 and 4, illustrate this through three examples from the 20 PFI housing projects undertaken to date in the UK, underscoring the social costs of for-profit management in social housing for tenants and residents. Utilising the powerful testimonies of indignant tenants, Hodkinson expertly captures the catalogue of errors, neglect, discrimination and abuse meted out to tenants as they confront extensive and disruptive refurbishment delays, substandard maintenance, vandalism to personal property and potentially life-threatening gas, electricity and cladding installation. In chapter 5, Hodkinson lays the blame not only on the PFI contractors but also the local councils, who signed-off patently unsafe maintenance works, refused to accept responsibility for poorly-written contracts (often after 'value-engineering' negotiations that were bound to cause issues for tenants), and defended PFI schemes as 'the only game in town', even as the evidence of their failure mounted all around. Between the PFI partners and local authorities, Hodkinson shows how the valiant efforts of tenants to resolve horrendous issues have been met with an 'accountability vacuum' that has created a litany of physical and mental health issues for tenants. This is all the more galling since in chapter 6, the escalating public costs of PFI and the massive profits accrued by PFI contractors is stringently exposed.

If, as Hodkinson powerfully maintains, the Grenfell disaster was "the inevitable outcome of a privatised, deregulated and unaccountable system of housing provision" (227), then how might this state of affairs be changed? In the concluding chapter, Hodkinson makes three main proposals. Firstly, the re-

empowerment of residents and the restoration of accountability in housing. Secondly, the re-regulation of the building and landlord sectors. Thirdly, the remunicipalisation of UK housing. Each of these proposals involving several distinct legislative changes. The recommendations in each case are sensible, necessary and in principle achievable, but given Hodkinson's experience working with tenants and the 'accountability vacuum' that tenants face, so convincingly explored in chapter 6, one minor quibble is that he does not consider here the political organisational pressure by tenants that would almost certainly be necessary to mandate such a progressive housing agenda (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Gray, 2018). Notwithstanding, Hodkinson does provide tenants with a rigorous and persuasive argument that provides crucial evidence and discursive legitimacy for building such a mandate.

Safe as Houses provides compelling reading for those interested in the privatisation of housing and urban space more generally, while also centring the question of environmental health and safety. Ultimately, for this reviewer, its most significant contribution is to face squarely up to the preventable disaster of Grenfell Tower, and other potential housing disasters waiting to happen, by making a strong claim for the remunicipalisation of housing and the renewal of building and safety standards. The book can thus be usefully located within a wider municipal agenda across Europe which seeks to arrest decades of privatisation, outsourcing and deregulation by democratising socio-economic life and bringing services back into public/common ownership (Russell, 2019). Crucially, as Hodkinson makes clear, this must not only be about the production of more municipal housing 'units', or the expropriation of private housing, but

about legislating for proper regulation, maintenance and building control: quality as well as quantity. It was only with the development of municipal housing that a wider system of building regulation and control came to mitigate the 'social murder' that was so endemic to free market housing in the 19th century. It is a sad indictment of contemporary UK housing that this may be one of the most convincing reasons for the remunicipalisation of housing in the 21st century.

References

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